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AS TO THE FORMS OF DISCOURSE

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Since a chief aim of composition courses in the grades and high school is to help young people toward clear thinking, it will scarcely be denied that they must somewhere learn, in simple and observable matters of their own experience, to distinguish between facts and opinions. Only from a beginning at grasping this essential distinction can they be freed from hopelessly passive acceptance, without seeing any difference, of statements of fact and statements of interpretation, an impartiality that characterizes most high-school graduates who come into college classes. Only so can their writing be disburdened of the conventional judgments and valueless inferences, got anyhow except by true thought of the writers, which are the dulness and distress of theme teachers. Building themes on bases of actual perceptions, facts of the pupils' living experience, is the first essential for developing such thought power. To be sure, these perceptions come frequently from far beyond the range of direct observation. All sorts of observable matters, in science or literature, are often more vividly reconstructed from others' accounts, by young people's imaginations, and appeal more strongly to their interest, than the commonplace of every day. And so these matters become for them actual perceived facts. Material of a child's simple sense-impression is alone separable by him from all conclusions he or anyone else may draw from it. From this beginning only can he learn to attack harder problems of analyzing interpretations and of making fair and useful judgments of his own.

In order that his activity of original exploration and analysis may come to proper development, however, further positive help is necessary. If the composition work is to give this help, it should so proceed from the presentation of observed facts—sense-impressions—to their interpretation, that pupils will most readily comprehend the precise demarkation of the two. The difficulty I have most often met in attempting to organize such courses has its root in the present classification of the forms of discourse. For, useful as this doubtless is for sorting completed pieces of writing, it does not view the process of composition from the side of the thoughts or ideas the writer has to express, and particularly of his purpose in expressing these. In other words, its divisions are not in any case made on the line of the cleavage between fact and opinion fundamental to just this problem. Hence I venture to present, on the basis of the division suggested in Appendix I, a reclassification of forms of writing (Appendix II). Of course it is by no means my intention to make an attack on present composition courses or texts, but simply to work out, from this division as a basis, such a sequence of presentation for the elementary- and high-school years as will help children, first of all, toward surer power of thinking. A second value that I shall attempt to demonstrate for this regrouping is a considerable simplification of the theory of composition writing essential to these preparatory courses.

The chief division is between the forms used in the presentation of facts (I) and those which develop generalizations or interpretations (II). Facts are here defined as simple and definite perceptions or sense-impressions. Hence the first type includes the handling of such matters in the manner of objective description and simple narration; for example, the tavern episode in *A Lodging for the Night*; and, further, direct statement of fact-information in regard to machines, processes, and like observable matters. With the need for grouping these facts on the basis of their relations and for inquiring into their significance, however, comes the necessity for the general statement, the conclusion built upon these concrete facts. Such a conclusion marks a piece of writing as of the second type (II). To this type belong not only the kinds of writing now classed as interpretive exposition and argument, but also those sorts

of description that include analysis and inference. In most essays and addresses the writer, in addition to setting forth perceptions of his own or of someone else's account, states conclusions as to the inner nature or outward bearings of these facts, for instance in the *Cooper Union Address* or Newman's *The Idea of a University*. Moreover, the analyses of motive and character or of plot-sequence about which are built *Silas Marner* and *Macbeth*, for example, are no less the mark of the interpretive type, which thus includes fiction and drama and a great proportion of verse. The difference between these chief divisions, I and II, may be stated as that between the presentation, first, of concrete facts just as the senses of the observer perceive them, and second, of the operation of thought in analyzing or grouping a number of such facts or coming to conclusions about them—a distinction of the greatest importance certainly, but possible only in matters of the writer's real and living experience, however obtained.

As Appendix II further suggests, facts are presented or interpretations made with one of two purposes: the first (A) is to reconstruct or analyze an experience simply for the interest it has or for the greater insight that it, as a bit of life, may make possible for the reader. The purpose in the second (B) is to present useful information or to develop conclusions or suggest advisable action upon the basis of that information, whether as exposition or argument—statistics, essays, orations, and so on. Hence in A come the greater part of the types usually classed as narrative and descriptive; yet of course, in this division according to the purpose of the writer, such "descriptions" as a surveyor's report of a piece of woodland or a scout's account of the enemy's movements come under the information-serving forms (B). Probably the distinction comes nearer to that between "the literature of power and the literature of knowledge." In lower-school theme work it is really a minor one, however, of value only because the purpose in the second results in certain differences in organization and treatment (p. 204), and because a clearer demarkation between fact and opinion is possible in the type that gives information (B).

As to actual organization of courses from this grouping as basis (Appendix III), the work begins most naturally with simple incidents

from the pupil's living and at best recent experience; the child tells naturally though ineffectively of whatever he has seen or done. The pale and thin bits of narrative that result at first may be made vivid by addition here and there of details to give the reader the most important and characteristic sense-impressions of the observer—the outline of a person, sketched in with an individual detail or two of dress or gait: “a waddling squat woman in pink calico”; the odor of beach or campfire; sound, and the like. So constructed, the small incidents have in dilution the essence of great objective narrative, from the simplicity of tale or epic to the great complexity of *Markheim*. From these grow problems of similar conditions that help the pupils to get their senses on more of really concrete detail, the problems of brief visualizations of persons and scenes. All these matters are to be presented as objectively as possible; they are to set forth all that the writer's senses have apprehended. When a pupil makes a general statement, as that the house was desolate looking, the class attempts, by examining him, to get at the precise details of weeds and cobwebs and decay that gave him this impression. It is the same with his inferences as to unperceivable matters, of mood and motive for example. It requires but little observation to discover how conventionally most young people observe or fail to observe. Yet those who have tried it know how surprisingly good are often the results of suggestions that awaken real perception of colors, and voice and manner, and other details. Though we force no objection, then, to the statement of general impression or of any other conclusion, the pupil usually finds that the need for it has disappeared with his presentation of real perceptions, and he comes naturally to reserve the inference and the interpretation for places and problems where they are essential.

Parallel with these short assignments of presenting incidents and other small groups of sense-impressions for somebody's pleasure, the pupil early attempts to state as information-matter certain other experiences—things he himself has made, simple machines he has examined, and so on, like the kindergarten child explaining to his mother how he made a wagon of folded paper. This sort of problem is developed in the grades at the same time as the other,

with no conscious attempt at differentiation. Such themes, carried through all the range of the pupils' observation and far beyond that to all they can realize of presentations in history and geography and literature, afford material for almost unlimited composition work. But most pupils are early and often ready also with their conclusions about what interests them—statements of values, proposals for action, and the like. Provided these show real thinking, a pupil should at any time be allowed to give them expression; but he should be required to state them specifically as opinions. For it is on this side (B) that the distinction can be most unmistakably shown and has the least of clouding and confusion to contend with. The grade and high-school pupil has peculiarly few opportunities—even less than most of us nowadays—to test and establish for himself the validity of facts he hears stated or finds recorded. But he can at the least make some progress toward finding what statements must be taken as facts and what are merely opinion put forward by a writer or speaker. And this the pupil can best learn in dealing with conclusions which he has either formed for himself or so thoroughly analyzed to basic facts, quite comprehensible to him, that he can not only explain but defend the interpretations intelligently. From those universally accepted conclusions which (in spite of the success he often appears to have in modern laboratory courses) the pupil cannot possibly demonstrate as valid, he can get some composition value by stating them, like old proverbs, with his own small paring of experience added by way of definite example or apparent exception. He could well know more than he does at present as to what he is doing in these matters. But the main course of his composition training passes by this region in its route from the pupil's actual experiences in perception to what he makes of them.

It is never a great while in the advancing of the pupils' own interpretations, or those they are fully masters of, before different opinions appear in different quarters of the class, ruffling and confronting one another. Then begins a really living study of the tests and supports of opinion—of the uselessness of attack or defense without solid basis in keen observation or reliable reports. There is no necessary distinction of type, from the point of view of

this work at least, between interpretive exposition and argumentation; in every live interpretation ever advanced, all the armed forces of argument lie in the bush; and any conclusion whatever must be shown forth with its bases as accessible as possible to the reader, whoever he is, or else it is to be attacked as unfounded. It is far less essential that a pupil learn certain formal differences in organization and method here than that he come to some ability to detect the common putting forward of interpretations as though they were inseparable parts of the data they are deduced from. In presenting his own and other people's interpretations in this fashion, the pupil must, as in the statement of fact matter, handle many problems that are beyond the range of his possible observation. It is necessary that he learn, at some stage of his high-school preparation, a pretty thorough method of such research, with its dangers and values. The sole test of this sort of writing also is that it prove itself, by the individuality of its handling, to have become a part of the writer's personal experience and thought. Nothing is of more doubtful value, as an exercise in composition or as anything else, than the restatement of fact or interpretation that the writer has absorbed but not lived and thought through himself. He must, in and from his school and other experience, develop power of making fair and useful judgments and of presenting them clearly. And, too, he must discover that the final step is by no means reached with the generalization formulated; for this has and proves its usefulness only in actual application to new problems.

The interpretive description (II, A) belongs chronologically, no doubt, in sequence with the first type taught (I, A). Yet it is by no means certain that under present conditions any distinct study of this type can be attempted in the high school or the first year of college work. Compared to the interpretive exposition or argument, it is not capable of so exact study or so suited to average needs. It is a matter of artistry—the most difficult form to do or to teach, by precept at least. A course in this should comprise definite experiments to find the precise coloring of perception by mood and prejudice and conventional beliefs, and to discover methods by which we come to judgments that are of any value as to other people's character and motive. In these analyses of

our subtle inferences lies the only usefulness on the narrative-description (A) side of the distinction between fact and conclusion out of fact. Further work in the type is the study of the intricate interpreting of relations from which issues the plot of story or drama or novel. The method through all this is to be worked out by critical examination of fiction and of various types of poetry and of the pupil's own best work, for the artistic meeting of problems similar to those that confront the class.

I have yet to discuss the second value which may come from reclassifying the forms of discourse, and that is a simplification of the theory of composition-writing that pupils in the grades and high school need master, particularly in the early years. This simplification follows merely from the sequence of material as I have presented it. Where the telling of simple observed incidents, alive so far as possible with sense-impressions (I, A), comes first, the assignment assists merely in limiting the writers to a single brief and central activity. The story, so limited, begins promptly with some really live happening, as where Johnny fell shrieking into the water; or it may give first any particularly vivid detail that someone has noted. Likewise it stops promptly when the important matters have been told. The arrangement of the details needs no attention; it follows simply the order of happening. Small visualizations may begin likewise with a striking detail, but they must give presently the outline (fundamental image) of what they are going chiefly to describe. Like the incidents, they are most easily and artistically arranged in the time order, so that all the details do not mass like so much wet clay; some of them, however, require a space arrangement, which means simply that the writer must use an order easy to follow, not jump about, flealike, in fitting his selected details into the outline he has given. Almost all this technique comes, not by precept, but in the course of things, through study of good stories by the pupils and by abler writers.

At first the simple explanation (I, B) has quite the same form of handling; "how I made a tent" or "found out how pavement is laid" is not different from the preceding problems, save that a difference in purpose, which is at one time or another casually discovered, demands rather more precision. For one thing, the theme

should tell at the start, perhaps in only three words, just what the reader is to learn about; it must "start fair." As the problems grow in complexity, however, sequence presents difficulties; it becomes needful now to learn something of the value of giving known or essentially basic matters first and even of enumerating the points to be discussed. Hereupon a further matter of technique resolves many difficulties: the guide sentence—somewhat like the fundamental image sentence in descriptions—gives in epitome the subject in its divisions, the plan of the whole. It is not necessarily a summary of the thought, or conclusion, like the topic sentence proper; it is the framework, the bones and articulations merely. Again, as to beginning and ending, themes of this type may infrequently need a sentence or two, before they actually get started, to explain their existence, or more often a summary at the end; but in general the principle of starting fair and stopping with the last, preferably the most significant point, is adequate, and does away with all confusing theory about introduction and conclusion—theory that aids the meeting of special problems, to be sure, like that in the *Speech on Conciliation*, but by no means applies to the great mass of compositions.

In interpretive explanation and argument (II, B), however, we come upon a wholly different form of development, the organization about a topic sentence that sums up the whole matter—not alone the subject but the predicate, the writer's conclusion or determination from the sum of the facts. This sentence is the basis of the entire structure of the interpretive (II) type; until the writer has this and has it clearly stated, he may have collected quantities of notes and even have elaborated some of his topics—he is by no means ready to write. It is simply that he must know where he is going, as Lincoln must have done before he rose to make the Gettysburg Speech. Once this sentence is fixed, he can proceed to build about it his development, facts and interpretation of facts. Then all of sequence and connection that he has learned in the other types stands to his service, for he is using the materials and methods of both. He must calculate nicely also the massing of his material, the relative proportion of main and lesser topics and of necessary conclusion. In the problems first attempted, his interpretation may be but a sentence at the end, the development up to this point

wholly that of the fact bases. In other cases the conclusion, with its implications examined in detail, may extend through the most of the theme. All these are matters for individual and class judgment and for study of what other writers have made of like problems. Such research contains material for many years of composition courses; it is the examination of how to think through to conclusions and how to think back of stated interpretations to their bases, and of the technique of how to present the matters clearly and interestingly. And the pupil who has borne a few times at least the drudgery of making a complete outline of an interpretive explanation, grouped under a topic sentence that summarizes it fully, and showing clear sequence and adequate transition material, has prepared himself to meet many problems in writing out his thoughts; more than this, he has learned something of what exact thinking really means, a subject on which he in general is at present most vague. The interpretive description has not the same problems, but an entirely different sort, developed on the basis of the effects it tries to secure.

I have tried to present my reasons for advancing a new classification of the forms of discourse and some rearrangement of the assignments and the theory of composition courses based on this system. The scheme is plentifully lacking in terminology; indeed, it is no part of my theory or practice that it be ever taught and catechized as a form of belief, only so used that pupils may come to grasp its fundamental distinction as the composition work proceeds. In literature classes, knowledge of this should aid young people in determining whether a novelist is presenting matters perceived or inferences and analyses of character and causation; whether an essayist is laying before us fact bases or erecting upon them his own conclusions. And so with the information which observation and experiment and other experience bring constantly, not only in the school but outside it; the knowledge that all this is material for real discrimination and analysis and for definite use, such as the young people have actually put it to in composition courses, makes it significant to them and gives them suggestions for its handling. In meeting problems, then, and in realizing and valuing interpretations of all sorts, their own as well as other people's, this sort of work in composition will be of a value at least

as great as that of its technique. I have, I think, found that courses so based and ordered have given my pupils really increased power of assimilating new material for judgment, fairly analyzing it in more or less elementary fashion, and presenting with reasonable clarity their personal mental response. However we go about to reach it, increase in such power is a purpose we all will gladly admit for the English courses.

APPENDIX I

AN ARRANGEMENT OF THE MATERIALS OF COMPOSITION

I. FACTS

Simple sense-impressions (perceptions), whether (1) observed directly or (2) imaginatively reconstructed from the reports of others' observation.

II. INTERPRETATIONS¹

- A) *Generalizations as to Relations of Facts*: classifications or groupings on the basis of cause and effect or of common and unlike terms (as of reasons for delinquency, or of forms of degeneracy, and so on); summaries, or statements of a general impression; inferences as to causes in mood and motive, or as to character (as in interpretive description).
- B) *Conclusions as to Significance of Facts* or of groups of facts (Newman's "The Idea of a University"); formulations of such conclusions as laws (of the conservation of energy); presentation of the best attitude or course of action in view of the whole of the facts (editorials, theses, orations, and so on).
- C) *Inferences of Fact*: most often snap-judgments as to a fact (I) not observed by the person judging ("It has rained, for the sidewalks are wet"); these have simply to be tested severely as fact evidence, which they usually purport to be; they have little or none of the value of other sorts of interpretations, and all the more instability.

APPENDIX II

A SCHEME OF RECLASSIFICATION FOR THE FORMS OF DISCOURSE

I. PRESENTATION OF FACTS

- A) *Sense-Impressions* suggested to give the reader a new and interesting bit of experience: the forms of simple *objective narration* and *description*.
- B) The same type of material, but chiefly such matters as machines, processes, and so on, stated in order to give the reader useful information: the form of *simple explanation*.

¹ All these interpretations (C most often without any process of thought) tend to become accepted as facts; A and B, especially where their fact bases are inaccessible to most people or are stated as revelation, often acquire universal veneration, but may at any time be repudiated.

II. INTERPRETATION OF FACTS

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| <p>A) Conclusions as to character—mood and motive and so on; and the complications of cause and effect in human action developed into <i>plot</i>: the <i>interpretive</i> forms of <i>narration</i> and <i>description</i>.</p> | <p>B) Generalizations—conclusions as to the <i>relations</i> and the <i>significance</i> of the bodies of fact presented as information in I, B: the forms <i>interpretive exposition</i> and <i>argument</i>.</p> |
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APPENDIX III

A SEQUENCE OF COMPOSITION WORK IN GRADES AND HIGH SCHOOL BASED ON APPENDIX II

- I, A. *Simple Incidents* made alive by observed detail; the purpose to give pleasure to a definite reader. These begin orally in the first school year and continue in various forms throughout the course; they need no forcing to develop in them interpretive description and plot narrative; on the contrary, the insistence must be on giving the concrete observation back of the general impression or conclusion; the writer is to present all that his senses lay hold of, and just as he himself has perceived it. Brief visualizations of persons and scenes, making somewhat harder requirements of sustained observing, come later; they have the same conditions. (Technique of this type, p. 204.)
- I, B. *Simple Explanations*—statements of machines and processes and like observable matters; the purpose to give the reader practically useful information. These move quite parallel with the first during the course; however, they require for their purpose rather more exactness (p. 205). These lead into much harder problems of organization and connection and to discovery, in the two highest grades probably, of necessity for grouping and sequence on less evident principles than time and space arrangement, and of the value of guides and connectives.
- II, B. *Interpretive Explanations*, which require an altogether different principle of development; purpose, to explain or to defend and establish a generalization. These may be attempted at any time that the pupil wants to present a conclusion he has really thought through originally or mastered from someone else's presentation, and can state it with its fact bases from observation or from reliable sources; it is most important that the pupil state the generalization as an opinion and so differentiate it from its fact bases. (Technique, p. 206, usable from the second high-school year.)
- II, A. *Interpretive Description and Plot-Narrative*: purpose, to present original interpretations of human character and actions. This type cannot perhaps be attempted in distinct courses in high school; it is analysis of inferences as to character and causation, and as such may be best developed perhaps by the insistence on real and not conventional observation in the type I, A. Here also the plot narrative most often develops unconsciously, and its technique may be given some attention.